



THOMAS COOPER GOTCH (1854-1931)



Arthur Tanner. *Mr. T. C. Gotch*, 1895, Photograph, *Black and White: A Weekly Illustrated Record and Review*, 21 Sept. 1895, p. 379.

The strategic career choices of Thomas Cooper Gotch illustrate the diverse options available to a British painter in the 1890s. Dissatisfied with his initial lack of success working in the French-influenced naturalist style of the Newlyn School in Cornwall, he eventually became a recognized contributor to turn-of-the-century art by re-introducing into his work academic realist detail, tightly painted surfaces, and bright colours, along with a Symbolist subject matter focused primarily on children.

Born in Kettering, Northamptonshire, in 1854 to a family of bankers and shoe factory owners, Gotch broke with family expectations by choosing a career in art. Somewhat unusually for an English painter, his art training was international,

beginning at Heatherley's, an independent drawing academy in London (1876–1877; 1878) and continuing at the Koninklijke Academie in Antwerp (1877–1878). He then returned to London, to study first with portrait painter Samuel Lawrence (1878) and then with the French artist Alphonse Legros at the Slade School of Art (1878–1880). Seeking a variety of influences and experiences, Gotch next moved to Paris to become a pupil in the atelier of Jean-Paul Laurens (1880–1883). From 1883 to 1887, he was based in London again, finally moving more permanently to Newlyn in 1887 to participate in its art colony. A break with the dominant Newlyn style earned Gotch a measure of prominence in the 1890s, and he exhibited internationally at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1893); the Paris Salon (1895, medal; 1896, medal); the Berlin International (1896, medal); the Brussels International Exhibition (1897), and the Exposition Universelle de Paris (1900, hon. mention).

Both sociable and desirous of institutional support and prestige, Gotch participated in many artists' organizations. He found himself most compatible with other French-trained painters, who prioritized observation from life but relied on overall atmospheric and painterly effects rather than tightly polished detail to create their aesthetic. In 1886 he became a founding member of the New English Art Club (NEAC), which successfully challenged the hitherto supreme authority of the Royal Academy (RA). At this time, Gotch also became close to James McNeill Whistler, president of the Society of British Artists (SBA), although, as a member of the SBA's hanging committee, Gotch tangled with the famously arrogant painter over policy. In 1887, he helped to found the Royal Anglo-Australian Society of Artists (later re-named the Royal British Colonial Society of Artists) and served as its president from 1912 to 1928. Other associations that exhibited his work include the Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours, the Marlborough Art Club, and the New Gallery. In 1895, Gotch also helped to start an important annual exhibition for the Newlyn art colony.

In 1879, Gotch and a friend from the Slade School, Henry Scott Tuke, visited the picturesque fishing village of Newlyn just as it was beginning to attract artists (particularly those who had also spent time in French painting colonies). Tuke moved to Newlyn in 1883, followed in 1884 by artist Stanhope Forbes, whom Gotch may have

known in Paris and who soon became a prominent leader of the colony and the NEAC. Like fellow Newlyn artists such as Forbes and Frank Bramley, Gotch combined French naturalism and plein-air techniques to portray everyday life in the Cornish fishing community. Inspired by Jules Bastien-Lepage and Jean François Millet, he drew attention to marginalized subjects such as female fishmongers and sailor's widows through a picturesque social realism marked by an interest in light effects and somber palette.

Dissatisfied with his lack of success as a painter of Cornish life, in 1891 Gotch traveled to France, Switzerland, and Italy, wintering in Florence, where he absorbed Renaissance art and subsequently adopted a change of style. His new work was enigmatic, symbolic, and free from narrative, but yet remained grounded in close observation from life. The first major painting in the new style was *My Crown and Sceptre* of 1893, although it was *The Child Enthroned* of the following year that attracted serious critical attention. The piece portrays his daughter Phyllis robed in elaborately patterned textiles and seated in a frontal, perfectly symmetrical pose reminiscent of medieval and Renaissance seated virgins or images of God the King. Worked in a tightly detailed, brightly coloured style, with a flat space that emphasized the decorative surface, the painting is a clear departure from the lower-keyed hues and brushier style of his *Sharing Fish* (1891). His adoption of the child as his primary subject matter made his work conspicuous amongst other allegorical or symbolic pictures that deployed the figure of the adult woman. As one critic understood Gotch's choice of imagery, "the Child, conceived as an Idea" could be suggestive of youth generally; a rebirth of art; the "procreative force"; the infant Jesus; or the baby Dionysus. In particular, his choice of girls suggested the superior ability of the female sex to represent a spiritual ideal and force in the world (Caffin, 925-26).

Gotch also painted more overtly allegorical work, such as *Death the Bride* (1895), which suited the fin-de-siècle taste for subjects that mingled the morbid and the erotic. Successful with critics, it was described as "one of the most powerful imaginative works and one of the most complete pictures of the year" ("Pictures of the Year," 937). Reviewers described a range of potential reactions to Gotch's vision of death, suggesting the flexibility of meaning in his work. For one critic, she was "young and fair, but of sly,

cruel gaze” (“Pictures of the Year,” 937); another described her expression as “sad and winning, and yet inscrutable,” arguing it was “a new conception of death[, ...]one which shall be sympathetic” (“The Royal Academy of Arts 1895,” 174). This sort of semantic capaciousness was a hallmark of much 1890s art, and of Gotch’s in particular.

In October of 1895, Gotch contributed *Blue Hills Mine* and *Charcoal Study*, to *The Yellow Book* (Vol. 7); his wife Caroline also contributed two artworks to this volume, *Motherhood* and *On the Seine*. As this was the same year that Gotch received positive acclaim at the Royal Academy for his *Child Enthroned*, the most definitive statement of his break with his previous Newlyn manner, the periodical editors’ choice might be seen as a strategic pairing of his two styles. The photo-engraved watercolour portrays a tin mine in Blue Hills, Cornwall, as a series of triangular shapes of rooves, scaffolding, and hillocks, against which the smokestack stands out defiantly. This sort of stark acknowledgement of the industrialization of the landscape was not often tackled by the Newlyn School, which preferred more picturesque seaside subjects.



Thomas Cooper Gotch, *Alleluia* (1896, Tate Britain)

Gotch's second piece for *The Yellow Book* was a study for one of the figures in *Alleluia*, his RA painting of 1896. Portraying a group of girls of varying ages holding scrolls of music and singing, the piece combines his now signature subject with an interest in a synaesthetic blending of visual art and music typical of the later nineteenth century. As a trained singer himself, Gotch brought his knowledge to bear on the accuracy of rendering such a scene, and his daughter Phyllis, who coincidentally eventually became a concert singer, again modeled for the central figure.

Gotch compounded the High Anglican emphasis of this work by including a quotation in the RA catalogue from Psalm 47: "Sing praises to God, etc." Ironically, the childlike naiveté of some of the younger girls suggests that they are not fully conscious of the import of their song. Older children, such as the dark haired girl of the *Charcoal Study* (seen in the painting as the second from the right in the back row), appear more spiritually elevated; this girl is marked out by her prayerful clasped hands and her closed mouth. Charles Caffin, in a *Harper's* article on Gotch, blurs concepts of social and genetic reform in his suggestion that the artist's children reminded viewers of not only the need for state education but also the spiritual and physical nurturing of a "new breed of mortals." For this author, the "sanctity of childhood" was a "new religion" leading to the "regeneration of the race" (926-27). Such language speaks of the way in which the notional innocence and purity of the white child could be co-opted into regimes of racial hierarchy.

Gotch died "in harness" at varnishing day at the Royal Academy in London in 1931 and was buried at Sancreed churchyard in Cornwall.

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Selected Works by Gotch

Sharing Fish. 1891.

The Lady in Gold (Portrait of Mrs. John Crooke). 1891.

My Crown and Sceptre. 1892. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

A Golden Dream. 1893. Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, UK.

The Child Enthroned. 1894.

Death, The Bride. 1895. Alfred East Art Gallery, Ketterin.

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The Child in the World. 1895 (oil); 1900 (watercolour).

Alleluia. 1896. Tate Britain, London.

The Heir to All The Ages. 1897.

A Pageant of Childhood. 1899. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

The Dawn of Womanhood. 1900.

Holy Motherhood. 1902. Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne.

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